



Arizona State Senate *Issue Brief*

September 20, 2006

Note to Reader:

The Senate Research Staff provides nonpartisan, objective legislative research, policy analysis and related assistance to the members of the Arizona State Senate. The *Research Briefs* series, which includes the *Issue Brief*, *Background Brief* and *Issue Paper*, is intended to introduce a reader to various legislatively related issues and provide useful resources to assist the reader in learning more on a given topic. Because of frequent legislative and executive activity, topics may undergo frequent changes. Additionally, nothing in the *Brief* should be used to draw conclusions on the legality of an issue.

AIMS (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards)

STUDENT ASSESSMENTS IN ARIZONA

Norm-referenced tests assess student performance in the subject areas of reading, language and mathematics. The purpose of these tests is to measure student performance compared to students in the same grades in other states. Arizona currently administers TerraNova to students in grades 2 and 9 in reading/language arts and mathematics.

Criterion-referenced tests (CRT) align with a state's academic content standards. The purpose of this assessment is to measure student performance of core subject areas and proficiency in the state's academic content standards written to each grade level. The Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) serves as Arizona's competency test for grades 3 through 8 and as a high school exit exam.

Arizona administers two forms of the AIMS test: 1) AIMS-DPA and 2) AIMS-HS. The AIMS-DPA is a dual purpose assessment (criterion and norm-referenced) test administered to students in grades 3 through 8. The AIMS-DPA combines AIMS assessment questions that are aligned with state academic standards, and questions from the TerraNova test. The AIMS-HS is a criterion-referenced test aligned with state academic standards administered to high school sophomores and any juniors and seniors who have not yet passed the test. High school students graduating in 2006 and thereafter must pass the AIMS test to receive their high school diploma, with limited exceptions for 2006 and 2007 in which scores can be augmented, which is discussed below. Each form of the AIMS test covers the content areas of writing, reading and mathematics.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE AIMS TEST

In 1996, the State Board of Education (SBE) began implementation of the AIMS test to measure student achievement of the state's academic content standards. SBE designated grades 3 through 8 and 10 as the grade levels assessed every year, plus any students in grades 11 and 12 who have not passed the high school AIMS test. The first administration of the high school

AIMS test occurred statewide in 1999, and statewide testing of AIMS for grades 3, 5 and 8 began in 2000.

The AIMS test was developed through a process involving test contractors (CTB/McGraw-Hill and National Computer Systems), the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), teachers and district test coordinators. All items were selected, written and revised to eliminate bias and ensure alignment with the academic content standards. Short answer and extended-writing responses were further reviewed in a process called “range-finding,” where all possible answers were reviewed and a uniform scoring guide was created. The test contractors and the Arizona Technical Advisory Committee, a committee made up of measurement specialists and district assessment coordinators, also scrutinized each item for its technical qualities.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENT

High school students are required to begin taking the AIMS test for graduation purposes as sophomores, allowing multiple opportunities (twice each school year) to pass the test before the end of a student’s senior year. As students progress through their high school curriculum and the academic content standards, the test is intended to measure academic achievement and mastery of those standards as a minimum requirement for graduating. Multiple versions of the high school test are required since high school students have five opportunities to pass the AIMS high school graduation test.

In 2005, legislation allowed students graduating in 2006 and 2007 who have not passed an individual section or multiple sections of the test, to augment their score up to 25 percent based on their grades in courses that are required for graduation under the state’s academic standards. Students graduating in 2008 must pass all sections of the high school AIMS test in order to graduate from high school.

All non-special education students, including those students classified as English Language Learners, are required to take the AIMS test.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Other legislation enacted in 2005 allows students with disabilities who have individualized education plans (IEP) or Section 504 plans to graduate from high school without passing the AIMS test if the student’s IEP or Section 504 plan does not require the student to pass AIMS. This legislation codified the findings of a 2005 Arizona Attorney General’s opinion on the issue.

AIMS GRADUATION LAWSUIT

In April 2006, the William E. Morris Institute for Justice and the Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest filed a lawsuit on behalf of two students, Perla Espinoza and Hannah Gonzales, arguing that the AIMS graduation test was unconstitutional due to the state’s failure to adequately fund programs for low income, minority and English Language Learners. In May 2006, the Court refused to temporarily suspend the AIMS graduation requirement for students graduating in 2006. As of August 2006, *Espinoza v. State of Arizona* is pending an evidentiary hearing on the merits of the case.

AZ LEARNS

Proposition 301, approved by voters in November 2000 to increase funding for education through an increase in the state sales tax by six-tenths of one percent, also established a new school accountability program, or AZ LEARNS. AZ LEARNS is also used to meet accountability requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which requires that all schools make adequate yearly progress toward ensuring that all students are able to demonstrate proficiency of state academic standards.

The ADE uses individual and aggregate student AIMS test results as one determinate of a school’s annual achievement and adequate yearly progress. Specifically, the measure stipulates that a school has met adequate yearly progress if at least 90 percent of the students who are continuously enrolled in the school pass the AIMS test for their respective grades, or if the percentage of students who pass the AIMS test for their respective grades is higher than the

previous school year. Based on this calculation and other measures of academic progress, accounting for pupil mobility and distribution of pupil achievement, ADE provides a school classification, or “label,” for a school’s overall academic performance as either: 1) excelling; 2) highly performing; 3) performing; 4) underperforming; or 5) failing.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Arizona Department of Education
www.ade.state.az.us/standards
- Arizona State Board of Education
602-542-5057
- “*AIMS as a High School Graduation Requirement: Analysis of Public Survey Data and Recommendations*”, a report for the Arizona State Board of Education, WestED, March 26, 2001
www.ade.state.az.us/standards/aims/publicinput/
- “*Overview of Arizona’s Assessment Programs*”, Arizona Department of Education, November 2005
www.ade.state.az.us/standards